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# From Merkel to Kramp-Karrenbauer: Can German Christian Democracy Reinvent Itself?

JÖRG MICHAEL DOSTAL

## Abstract

Germany's Christian Democrats have started preparing for the time after Angela Merkel. After ten years as German chancellor facing a weak opposition, Merkel unexpectedly split the country in late 2015 and early 2016 because of her 'open border' policies that allowed more than 1 million refugees and migrants to rapidly enter Germany. Her management of the subsequent crisis was largely considered a failure and her party suffered a series of dramatic election defeats. Reacting to the negative electoral feedback, and in particular the breakthrough of the rightist and anti-immigration Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Christian Democratic Union organised an intra-party contest to replace Merkel as party leader. Three candidates with different political profiles, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, Friedrich Merz and Jens Spahn, contested the election. By voting for Kramp-Karrenbauer, the CDU membership voiced support for maintaining a large-scale political coalition based on efforts to find compromises between different party wings and social and cultural interests.

**Keywords:** Angela Merkel, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Germany, Friedrich Merz, Jens Spahn

## Introduction

IN THE twenty-first century, German politics has been transformed. The German polity is now characterised by deep cultural, social and political divisions. Two chronic policy-making conflicts have jointly undermined an earlier more consensus-driven political culture. These are firstly the social welfare retrenchments that were enacted between 2003 and 2005 by the then 'red-green' Social Democratic and Green Party coalition government; and secondly the decision of Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) to allow refugees and migrants to enter the country in late 2015 and early 2016, which resulted in the rapid influx of more than 1 million people from African and Asian countries into Germany.

In the larger context of socio-economic change and growing social inequality, these two political cleavages have jointly undermined the electoral appeal of the traditional German 'catch-all' or 'people's parties', the centre-right Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and the centre-left Social Democrats

(SPD). In the last federal election of 2017, the former achieved 32.9 per cent and the latter 20.5 per cent of the national vote, their second-worst and worst result ever in the history of the Federal Republic. Their subsequent reluctant forming of a 'grand coalition' government in March 2018 (the term appears hardly appropriate any longer since both parties barely assemble a majority in parliament) raises the question as to whether Germany will follow most other EU countries in experiencing an increasingly fragmented and weak party system.

This article takes up the case of the German Christian Democrats (CDU), still the largest centre-right party in a core EU country, and asks how it plans to reorganise its political strategy in what will soon be the post-Merkel era.<sup>1</sup> In particular, how will the CDU manage the transition away from Merkel to a new party leadership and, directly related, how is the party going to react to political challenges from right-wing populists (the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party), on the one hand, and competing centrist political forces (the Greens and the SPD) on the other?

In what follows, Merkel's successful political past between 2005 and 2015 is briefly sketched. Next, the two central German political cleavages (welfare, and refugees and migration) are examined in order to provide some background to better understand the behaviour of Merkel and her party in recent times. Thirdly, Merkel's refugee and migration policies since September 2015 and the ensuing backlash are discussed. The fourth section examines how the CDU reacted to Merkel's decline in popularity and how her resignation as party leader was prepared. The fifth section describes the subsequent contest, in early December 2018, between centrist Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer and two more conservative candidates, Friedrich Merz and Jens Spahn. Finally, the conclusion analyses the future political opportunity structure for the CDU in Germany's by now well-established six party system: will the CDU be able to reinvent itself under the new leadership of Kramp-Karrenbauer?

## Merkel's successful past (2005–2015)

For most of Merkel's chancellorship since 2005, observers have argued that her leadership pushed the CDU firmly to the centre ground of German politics. During her time in office, she was credited with taking over many policies of her electoral competitors—the SPD and the Greens, in particular—while 'modernising' her own party in parallel. Crucially, when Merkel became chancellor in 2005, she abandoned the radical welfare retrenchment of the previous SPD and Green Party coalition government in favour of a return to small-step and incremental policies. Her economic policies were centrist, essentially going with the flow of events. She abandoned 'ideological neoliberalism' in favour of a more accommodating style, which also included re-regulatory policies on numerous occasions.

During her chancellorship, pensions were at first retrenched. Later on, policy deliberation started to focus on how to compensate disadvantaged groups and some minor countervailing measures were enacted. After lengthy debate, a statutory minimum wage

was introduced in 2015. There were various rounds of 'rescuing' public and private banks and efforts to stabilise the euro currency zone, none of these measures being in line with supply-side economics or neoliberal doctrine. Going against the general pattern of slow decision making, but not against the general logic of her understanding of policy making, Merkel moved quickly after the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan in 2011 to commit Germany to abandoning nuclear energy at some future point. This new policy, the exact opposite of her previous course, was subsequently termed 'energy transition' (*Energiewende*). In order to establish her party, and herself, as the natural centre of German politics, coalition with all relevant competitors (namely the SPD, anti-nuclear Greens and Liberals) had to be possible at any point. In a similar context, the CDU's profile on socio-cultural issues shifted from conservative to liberal and progressive values. In particular, the party accepted same-sex partnerships, expansion of public childcare, the ideal of dual earner households, and dual nationality and citizenship offers for certain categories of migrants. Before being taken up by the Merkel-CDU, these policies had initially been advanced by electoral competitors.

Analysts have therefore described Merkel's general approach between 2005 and 2015 as 'calculated demobilisation' based on 'reduced party competition' and an 'electoral campaigning avoidance strategy'.<sup>2</sup> While conservative Merkel critics argued that she had turned the CDU into an empty shell devoid of any clear policy commitments, her admirers instead praised her formula for electoral success: occupying the political centre ground by borrowing policies from centrist competitors, and policy making based on consultation and incrementalism. During her 'grand coalitions' with the SPD (2005–2009, 2013–2017, and again since March 2018) and her single spell as leader of a centre-right coalition with the Liberals (FDP) between 2009 and 2013, Merkel profited to a large extent from demobilising mistakes of her coalition partners. After each electoral cycle, Merkel's political partners suffered electoral defeat while her CDU maintained the role of the natural party of government.

During the Merkel era, a general increase in social inequality occurred. The working and middle classes experienced stagnant or declining wages, while deregulated service work with low job security expanded.<sup>3</sup> Between the 2005 and 2009 federal elections, electoral participation declined by around 7 per cent—mostly demoralised former SPD voters—before recovering in the 2017 elections when the AfD managed to mobilise large numbers of former non-voters. Moreover, the share of the vote of ‘wing’ parties opposing Merkel on the left and right side of the political spectrum (the Left Party and the AfD) expanded. Crucially, calculated demobilisation during the Merkel chancellorship had a strong social class dimension: voters with lower socio-economic positions (unskilled and skilled blue collar workers and the urban poor) have increasingly turned away from participating in elections altogether or, more recently, have switched to vote for the rightist AfD party.<sup>4</sup>

While observers continue to disagree about the exact ingredients of Merkel’s past success formula, the date when her fortunes turned will likely be agreed to have been the 3 September 2015. On this day, Merkel decided to allow refugees and migrants waiting in Hungary to enter Germany. Her decision subsequently set in motion a large-scale population movement of more than 1 million refugees and migrants into Germany in late 2015 and early 2016. This policy decision immediately turned her from a representative of consensus into the most polarising politician in her own country and far beyond.

## Germany’s two chronic policy-making conflicts

To begin with, the post-2003 welfare retrenchment and labour market deregulation (so-called ‘Hartz reforms’), enacted under the former chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD), was jointly passed in parliament by SPD, Greens and the then CDU/CSU opposition. This occurred at a moment in time when neoliberal political ideas—deregulation, privatisation and growing acceptance of social inequality—had captured the imagination of Germany’s political class. However, the Hartz reforms

between 2003 and 2005 represented the highest peak of the neoliberal wave in Germany rather than a stable neoliberal hegemony. The reforms triggered a dramatic backlash—the largest anti-government street movement since the unification of Germany in 1990. Post-Hartz reform, the basis of the German welfare state model, namely status protection of skilled workers in a system of social insurance, largely disappeared.

Instead, the German welfare state became based on a much more limited concept of social protection associated with liberal rather than Bismarckian or social democratic welfare policies. The dramatic cuts in social security coverage, expansion of means-testing principles in unemployment insurance, pension retrenchment and deregulated labour markets all resulted in growing social inequality and a massive decline of satisfaction with the political system. By retrenching the welfare state, the SPD leaders effectively demoralised their own electorate. SPD voters were on average more likely to rely on welfare state policies than the economically better-off electorate of the CDU/CSU. From the CDU’s political point of view, letting the electoral competitors of the SPD volunteer for the electoral costs of welfare retrenchment was of course the optimal outcome.

Yet this relative protection of the CDU/CSU from electoral decline came to an end in the autumn of 2015. In early September, Chancellor Merkel took her lonely executive decision, without consulting with the German parliament or fellow EU member countries, to open Germany’s borders to refugees and migrants who had entered the EU via the Balkan route—often from Turkey—and had assembled in the Hungarian capital of Budapest. Initially, it was assumed that most of the refugees and migrants were of Syrian origin fleeing the war, and Merkel’s ‘humanitarian’ decision received extensive support from civil society representatives and the media. However, public attitudes started to shift following large-scale sexual assaults on women in the German city of Cologne and other places on New Year’s Eve 2016, in which most perpetrators turned out to be recent arrivals. Following these and other crime incidents, a massive backlash occurred that is still ongoing.

Crucially, the reason for the deep split in public attitudes with regard to refugees and migrants goes beyond simple impression management. In fact, the German public has never engaged in an open debate of migration-related issues. Until the end of the twentieth century, the Christian Democrats based some of their electoral appeal on the statement that 'Germany is not a country of immigration'. Historically, Germans used to subscribe to a concept of ethnic nationalism, which differs from notions of civic or republican nationalism along the lines of the US or French model. However, Germany has since the 1990s increasingly turned into a multi-ethnic society. There have been major migration waves from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union to Germany—in addition to earlier cohorts of migrants from Turkey and other southern countries. The share of people in Germany with a 'migration background' is now around one quarter of the resident population. Some of them hold dual citizenship—they were granted German citizenship without resigning their original one—while others do not. Crucially, younger age cohorts among the German resident population include the by far highest migrant (and Muslim-migrant) shares.

Thus, Merkel's post-2015 refugee and migration policies clashed with long-standing cultural values and German anxieties, including the observation that many German cities have turned from predominantly ethnic German into ethnically segregated cities over the last generation or so. Ultimately, a combination of long-term and short-term factors, especially Merkel's failure to communicate clearly with the German public over her migration policies, meant that confidence in Merkel's leadership was in the eyes of many observers damaged beyond repair. Her near-complete isolation on the issue in the EU context—Germany's decision was largely resented by neighbouring EU countries—further underscored the poor impression. Ultimately, the EU-Turkey agreement with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan largely closed off access to the 'Balkan route', thus limiting the further arrival of migrants in Germany. The agreement also included outsourcing the protection of parts of the EU's external border to Turkey, in exchange for financial contributions.

## Merkel's rapid domestic decline since 2015

Merkel's decision to allow the free entry of refugees and migrants into Germany on 3 September 2015 was from the beginning highly contested. Only three days later, the then CSU party chairman and current German interior minister Horst Seehofer criticised the action, commenting that 'Merkel's border opening is a major mistake that will keep us busy for a long time' and that 'we can only avoid a democratically legitimated right wing if we take up worries and fears in the population'.<sup>5</sup> Such anxieties prepared the stage for the subsequent decline in Merkel's standing and popularity. Her initial political explanation was that Germany opened its borders to grant shelter to refugees from the Syrian war and from other war zones in a 'humanitarian gesture'. What was surprising about this claim was that Germany and the other EU countries had for a long period failed to finance humanitarian assistance for those Syrians who had left their country for neighbouring states in the Middle East and in Turkey. (The UN relief effort had been underfunded and continues to be underfunded today.)

Following the quick growth in the number of refugees and migrants entering Germany, a second explanation gained currency, namely Germans were helping others in order to prepare their own long-term economic prosperity. This account stressed that many of the refugees were 'doctors and nurses' who, following their social integration into German society, would soon contribute to the economic prosperity of their host society. Some enthusiasts started to refer to the newcomers as 'the new Germans'.

Looking back, neither of these initial explanations for Merkel's policy-making could be confirmed. Among the around one million asylum seekers entering Germany during the open border episode between September 2015 and March 2016, around 70 per cent were young people, under the age of thirty, and around two-thirds were male. During 2016 and 2017, more than 1.2 million asylum requests were received by the German authorities, which included additional people who had entered the country before and after the open border episode or had



travelled on other routes to reach Germany. Less than a third of the people entering originated from Syria, while the remainder originated from a large number of African and Asian countries. Around half of the newcomers did not carry any identity papers and subsequent practical experience suggested that most of them would rely on the German welfare state for a long period of time.

Many critics of Merkel's course suggested that she had opened the gates for chaotic mass migration, which in effect privileged the most robust migrants and those paying smugglers to enter the EU. Critics within the CDU pointed out that the German state had simply lost control and that the most basic administrative procedures—such as keeping track of the number of new arrivals—were no longer being followed.<sup>6</sup> In the smart phone era, refugees and migrants could react in real time to changes in the state's policy and administration, while the state could not overcome the limitations of an analogue and slow administrative process.

Refugee and migrant-related problems still hold the highest salience of any political issue in Germany. Longitudinal opinion polls show that the topic 'foreigners/integration/refugees' has been considered the most significant issue ever since September 2014 by a plurality and sometimes a majority of respondents. For most of the time, the issue was considered more significant than four other topics (unemployment, economic issues, education and pensions) combined. Between August 2015 and February 2016, more than 80 per cent of people considered the topic the most important issue, while the figure declined below 50 per cent in April 2017. Significantly, numbers quickly climbed back up again between June and August 2018 when Merkel's government signed the 'UN Global Compact for Migration' thereby triggering a new round of domestic debates and criticism. Other longitudinal opinion polls suggest that the German public has been evenly divided on whether Merkel was doing a good or a bad job concerning refugees and migration. Since October 2017, however, a majority thought that she was doing a bad job.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the topic's salience continues to firmly dominate Germany's political agenda.

## The CDU responds to Merkel's decline in popularity

Many observers of Merkel's conduct since 2015 have criticised that she failed to communicate her policies in a transparent manner. A typical voice in this respect was the German singer Herbert Grönemeyer stating that 'I would hold against her that she simply does not communicate'.<sup>8</sup> Some CDU parliamentarians also felt that Merkel had stopped interactions with sections of the party, disagreeing with her handling of the crisis. To be fair, Merkel faced a *Catch 22* situation. Especially in the former East Germany, her decline in popularity was so dramatic that attempts to communicate with citizens became exercises in ridicule. In one typical instance, Merkel attended a meeting in the city of Chemnitz following the murder of a German citizen by migrants. Her introductory remark that 'I know that my presence is a provocation for some of you' triggered the response: 'When do you resign?'

Since September 2015, the CDU has experienced dramatic defeats in all regional elections and the 2017 federal election with only two exceptions (Saarland and North-Rhine Westphalia). The rightist AfD managed to enter each of Germany's sixteen regional parliaments, gaining around a quarter of their support from former CDU/CSU voters, while also collecting many votes from former non-voters and from former Left Party supporters, particularly in the former East Germany. Following another dramatic electoral defeat in the regional state of Hesse in October 2018 (the vote share of the CDU declined from 38.3 per cent to 27 per cent), Merkel announced her decision to resign as CDU party leader and, more crucially, made it known that her current term as chancellor would be her last. Thus, she will retire as chancellor in 2021 at the latest—even this tenure is only secure if the current coalition government manages to stay in office until then.

Merkel's decision reflected her loss of authority in the party. Crucially, the unprecedented lengthy negotiations following the 2017 federal elections on forming a new coalition government—first with Greens and Liberals for three months, ending in failure;

then with the SPD to agree yet another grand coalition for lack of any alternative option—made Merkel look weak as a national leader. Critics observed that ‘the defence of power by means of electoral success stands above the internal conflict [within the CDU] over concepts and policy content’ and that the peaceful coexistence between mid-level party bodies and the leadership ends ‘as soon as leading representatives can no longer credibly represent the promise to successfully defend power’.<sup>9</sup>

In February 2018, Merkel still tried to lead the renewal of her party when she pushed to install Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer as the new secretary general of the CDU. After regaining the chancellorship in March 2018—traditionally the major source of authority within the CDU when in government—she nevertheless suffered further decline of her authority in party circles. Competing power centres in the CDU, such as the parliamentary group in the federal parliament, the CDU regional prime ministers, and internal party associations such as the employee association (CDA), the economic council (*Wirtschaftsrat*) and the mid-sized business association (MIT), started to display more autonomy from the chancellor.

In this context, a new round of internal conflict within and between the two Christian Democratic parties (the CDU and the CSU) concerning the unilateral rejection of migrants at Germany’s borders in June 2018 was particularly damaging. This conflict was the final call on CDU party bodies to act in order to defend future electoral prospects. In September 2018, CDU federal parliamentarians unexpectedly rejected Merkel’s candidate Volker Kauder as parliamentary leader in favour of Ralph Brinkhaus, a CDU MP representing moderate Merkel critics. The dramatic election defeat of the CDU in the Hesse regional elections in the same month meant that Merkel now faced decisive pressure to ‘voluntarily’ resign her position as party leader.

## The future of the CDU: three candidates, three scenarios

Replacing Merkel as CDU leader was an effort to stop the party’s electoral decline. It

served as an important intermediate step to prepare the post-Merkel period once she leaves the chancellorship at the end of her current term in 2021, or at an earlier point. Within the CDU party hierarchy, her successor as party leader enjoys important agenda-setting powers. Crucially, there exists a convention in the CDU by which the party leader has the first right to suggest the party’s candidate for chancellor (self-nomination included). The three candidates competing for Merkel’s position as party leader at a party conference in December 2018 were Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, Friedrich Merz and Jens Spahn.

The three candidates were associated with different wings and tendencies within the CDU. Kramp-Karrenbauer, an economic centrist with somewhat conservative social leanings, was most closely associated with Merkel and considered to be her preferred candidate. Merz was on the contrary Merkel’s *bête noire* in the sense that he had competed with her for dominant influence in the party in the early 2000s. Back then, he had gained a reputation as a neoliberal purist and advocate of large-scale deregulation of the German economic model. In 2002, Merkel made him leave his position as CDU leader in the federal parliament in order to allow her to take over his position. His unexpected return to become a candidate for the CDU leadership in 2018 made him the immediate favourite of CDU-associated business circles. In contrast to Merz, Spahn as Germany’s current health minister could be described as a more flexible representative of the conservative wing. He is sometimes associated with the expansion of welfare state activities in Germany’s rapidly aging society. By the political standards of the CDU, he was clearly the most radical choice in terms of a political renewal of the party. Since each of the three candidates stands for a particular vision of the future of Germany’s Christian Democrats, it is worth briefly portraying them in turn.

### *Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer*

Kramp-Karrenbauer, age fifty-six, originates from Germany’s federal state of Saarland, the smallest non-city state with a population of less than 1 million people. After studying

political and administrative sciences, she has spent almost all her life as a professional politician acting as a big fish in the small pond of regional Saarland politics. She only started to gain a national profile because of her association with Merkel in recent years and her subsequent election as CDU general secretary during a party conference in February 2018. Kramp-Karrenbauer first entered the Saarland parliament in 1999 and subsequently acted as minister with various portfolios between 2000 and 2011.<sup>10</sup> Between 2011 and February 2018, she was the regional prime minister (*Ministerpräsident*) of the Saarland.

During her political career, she led three Saarland coalition governments, first briefly with Greens and Liberals between 2011 and 2012, before switching to a grand coalition with the SPD that was twice re-elected in 2012 and 2017. Crucially, Kramp-Karrenbauer's regional grand coalition differed from Merkel's grand coalition at the federal level in the sense that the CDU maintained high levels of support, receiving 40 per cent of the votes in 2017, gaining 5 per cent, which amounted to a singular success in an otherwise depressing recent CDU election record. A second contrast to Merkel's style of governing was that the Saar-SPD survived the collaboration with the CDU in good health receiving 30 per cent of the votes in 2017. Overall, Kramp-Karrenbauer's policy of compromise and collaboration with other political parties derived from the political culture of the post-industrial Saar region in which strong state leadership was required to restructure the economy from an earlier dependency on coal mining and the steel industry.

Over the years, Kramp-Karrenbauer became associated with the social wing of the CDU with regard to economic policies. In Germany's second federal parliamentary branch of the regions (*Bundesrat*), she supported as Saar prime minister in 2012 and 2013 SPD plans for a fixed quota of women on supervisory management boards and SPD and Green Party suggestions to introduce a statutory minimum wage and higher taxes on high income earners. On socio-cultural issues, Kramp-Karrenbauer voiced in 2015 her opposition to the legal equalisation of homosexual with heterosexual

marriage, a measure that was enacted in Germany in 2017. As a representative of the socially conservative wing of her party, Kramp-Karrenbauer stresses that she stands by the social ideal of traditional families ('the traditional constellation of father, mother and their biological children') and of associated tax and welfare policies.<sup>11</sup>

### *Friedrich Merz*

Merz, age sixty-three, differed from the other two candidates for the position of CDU leader in the sense that his career as a professional politician appeared to have already ended for good in 2009 when he left the federal parliament for a new career as a business lawyer. After studying law, Merz had a parliamentary career—first in the European Parliament, between 1989 and 1994, and then, between 1994 and 2009, in Germany's federal parliament. Throughout his political life, Merz was almost exclusively associated with business interests, acting as the leading advocate of the CDU's neoliberal turn. In the early 2000s he gained country-wide fame for his proposal to simplify radically the German tax system. His plan is still remembered as the 'beer mat' style of tax declaration, but left no subsequent political impact. When Merkel became chancellor in 2005, Merz was not offered a ministerial appointment. Subsequently, he shifted his portfolio of activities toward the business sector becoming first a lawyer with an international law firm in 2005 and then, in 2009, the chairman of the *Atlantik-Brücke*, Germany's most senior transatlantic network in which politicians and company executives rub shoulders with equivalent US leaders. In February 2016, Merz became one of three supervisory board chairmen of BlackRock Germany, the biggest US investment fund with many investments in German-based major corporations.

One of the consistencies of Merz' political life was his habit to act as a contrarian with a poor sense of timing. His strong self-confidence as one of Germany's leading pro-business representatives resulted in his publication, in 2008, of a monograph titled *Let us Dare more Capitalism*. The book restated principles of German-style ordoliberalism, suggesting that capitalism could gain more public support by turning



employees into stock market investors and shareholders in their own enterprise in order to 'overcome class differences that have only been kept alive artificially for a long time'.<sup>12</sup> However, his book was remarkably silent about the origins of the then ongoing global financial crisis, notably insufficient public regulation of the banking sector. He therefore failed to catch the public mood at the time.

His unexpected return into politics in 2018, campaigning to become Merkel's replacement as CDU party leader, triggered an initial wave of goodwill, particularly within his own party. Friendly media coverage described him as the 'James Dean of German politics' who 'died early enough to become a hero' (that is, had not been involved with Merkel's government).<sup>13</sup> However, he once again failed to reach out to sectors of the CDU beyond the market-liberal wing. While promising to regain half of the voters of the rightist AfD, he did not make explicit how he intended to regain these voters beyond being critical of Merkel's refugee and migration policies. His only other notable policy suggestion was introducing a tax-free allowance for private stock market investments.

As head of BlackRock Germany and an income millionaire, he involuntarily added to the impression that he was out of touch by claiming in an interview with a tabloid newspaper to belong to the 'upper middle class' rather than the 'small very rich and very wealthy upper class'.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, some commentators took great pleasure in pointing out to him that income millionaires were statistically not part of Germany's 'middle class'. In summary, Merz failed to reinvent himself as a politician able to reach out to the general public.

### *Jens Spahn*

As the youngest candidate by far, Spahn, at thirty-eight, was from the beginning considered to be without any realistic prospect of winning the contest. After joining the CDU at fifteen, he became the youngest directly elected member of Germany's federal parliament at age twenty-two in 2002, and started to focus on health policies. His subsequent

rapid political career included spells as leader of the CDU's working group on health between 2009 and 2015 and as one of the deputy leaders of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in 2013. He was then appointed as a parliamentary state secretary in the ministry of economics in 2015. In March 2018, Chancellor Merkel appointed him as Germany's minister of health. His short track record in this role suggests that he plans to gain a reputation as a mediator who can deliver reforms based on consensus building.<sup>15</sup> In this respect, Spahn differs from his fellow conservative Merz.

Before and during his campaign to become the new CDU leader, Spahn was the strongest critic of Merkel's refugee and migration policies. He repeatedly voiced concern about the illiberal attitudes of Muslim migrants in Germany, describing migration as 'the elephant in the room' and criticising those who evaded discussing the issues and taking difficult decisions.<sup>16</sup>

The decision about who would succeed Merkel as party leader was taken at a party conference in early December 2018. Spahn had failed to attract much attention for his candidacy since the media overwhelmingly framed the contest as a two-horse race between Kramp-Karrenbauer and Merz. Kramp-Karrenbauer won the contest to become the new CDU party leader in the second round with around 52 per cent of the party delegates' vote, narrowly beating Merz with around 48 per cent support. Spahn as the third candidate achieved around 15 per cent in the first round and was dropped from the second ballot. His voters evenly split up between the two remaining candidates.

## **Conclusion: can German Christian democracy reinvent itself?**

There are two levels of analysis of the CDU's behaviour in recent times: the tactical and the strategic level. Looking at short-term factors, the CDU has in recent months managed to organise a textbook power transition away from Merkel to Kramp-Karrenbauer. By separating Merkel's leadership of the government as chancellor from the party leadership and by offering the CDU

membership a choice between three candidates with very different visions for the party's future, the party management is now prepared for the time after Merkel.

There can be no reasonable doubt that Kramp-Karrenbauer is the most promising choice for the CDU's immediate future. Her political profile is much broader than that of her two contenders—the unreconstructed neoliberal Merz who had left frontbench politics for more than a decade and failed to expand his appeal beyond pro-business circles, and the more conservative Spahn who had campaigned on opposing Merkel's refugee and migration policies, that is, the most painful subject that the party wished to leave behind. As one observer has argued, the choice of Kramp-Karrenbauer means that 'the planned neoliberal restructuring (*Umcodierung*) of the CDU by Merz was avoided, and the path of liberal modernisation will be further followed'.<sup>17</sup> Thus, a narrow majority of CDU delegates voted for the candidate that offered the relatively best prospects to maintain the CDU as a broad political coalition.

From a strategic point of view, however, the future of the CDU remains in doubt. In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in electoral volatility. The CDU as the self-declared 'party of the centre' faces the problem that the centre of society is increasingly difficult to define: 'The more the bourgeoisie and bourgeois behaviour disappear as social phenomena, the less powerful centrist strategies of political parties appear'.<sup>18</sup> To be clear, the increasing electoral volatility is due to the decline of social integration in German society. One of the major trends of twenty-first century Germany has been the growing split between winners and losers of modernisation. In the context of a fragmented centre, petty bourgeois milieus believe that their future social standing is threatened. Crucially, the welfare retrenchment of 2003 to 2005 (the 'Hartz reforms') produced a first dealignment of a cohort of petty bourgeois and blue collar voters from the SPD and, less visibly, the CDU/CSU. Some of these voters have re-entered the electoral process in 2017 by voting for the AfD. In doing so, they were now joined by a second dealignment: many former CDU/CSU and SPD voters—and in East

Germany former Left Party supporters—switched to the AfD to voice their disagreement with Merkel's refugee and migration policies, claiming that their own social interests had been ignored for too long.

It is significant to underline the close relationship between the 'first' (post-2005) and the 'second' (post-2015) dealignment of former centrist voters from the centre-left and the centre-right, respectively. These two electoral shifts away from the centre are related by the feeling that the future holds little hope for those not able to compete in a rapidly changing socio-cultural and socio-economic environment with little promise of welfare and security by the state. One French observer puts it as follows: 'The population would not feel as threatened by the refugees if the welfare state would not have been retrenched. It is often said that people vote for the AfD because they fear for their own support by the welfare state. That one can easily comprehend; after all their social safety net was indeed massively cut down, although not because of the refugees but long beforehand by [SPD chancellor] Gerhard Schröder'.<sup>19</sup>

How is Kramp-Karrenbauer going to reposition the CDU in a period of growing social insecurity? In terms of addressing the various urgent issues—refugees and migration, social integration, economic policy-making—she needs to keep the party united and able to act. Her first high-profile activity as party leader was organising a workshop in early February 2019 with experts and practitioners, and without Merkel in attendance, to draw lessons from the post-2015 refugee and migration policies. During this meeting, Kramp-Karrenbauer acted as moderator inviting others to voice grievances and present ideas on how to rebuild political trust. Nevertheless, this discussion converged on what had already been debated for years: cuts in welfare payments for migrants, more repatriation of failed asylum seekers and efforts to strengthen border security and cooperation between EU countries. None of this is going to produce quick results or satisfy critics of Merkel's track record.

As for the related issue of social integration, it is unclear how Kramp-Karrenbauer intends to tackle the root causes of social crisis, namely Germany's dualistic labour

market with many categories of working poor, and the decline of trust in welfare state institutions. Here, the CDU's liberal wing argues for a zero-sum choice between welfare policies and tax cuts, favouring the latter. Kramp-Karrenbauer has already signalled that she is willing to support CDU liberals in demands to abolish the so-called 'solidarity surcharge' (*Solidaritätszuschlag*), a tax that was initially introduced after Germany's unification in 1990. The coalition agreement between CDU/CSU and SPD of March 2018 stated that this tax will be abolished for the lower 90 per cent of income earners during the current government. The CDU now demands that it should also be abolished for the top earners, which would satisfy liberals but questions Kramp-Karrenbauer's commitment to the social wing of her party.<sup>20</sup> In short, she is subject to strong and contradictory demands.

It is too early to tell whether Kramp-Karrenbauer can protect and/or reinvent the CDU as a political coalition. The rapid rise of the AfD as a party combining national conservative cadres, often with roots in the pre-Merkel CDU, supported by uprooted and disappointed voters from across the political spectrum has demonstrated that Germany's party system is now in flux. From the point of view of the CDU after Merkel, how to deal with the difficult relationship between social and cultural integration under conditions of a structurally weakened state after a generation of deregulation and privatisation remains an open question.

## Notes

All German sources translated by the author.

- For historical reasons, Germany's Christian Democrats are nominally organised into two separate parties, namely the CDU in fifteen of sixteen German federal states and the Christian Social Union (CSU) in the state of Bavaria. In the German federal parliament, the two parties have always formed a joint parliamentary group (*Fraktionsgemeinschaft*). The two parties have twice, in 1976 and in June 2018, considered splitting up their joint parliamentary group. The current article discusses the party case of the CDU but refers to the CDU/CSU when reference is made to the joint parliamentary group in the federal parliament. In terms
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- If not otherwise indicated, factual information about the three candidates derives from the online database 'Munzinger Internationales Biographisches Archiv'; <https://www.munzinger.de/search/query?query.id=query-00> (accessed 18 February 2019).
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